PURPLE DRAGON: The Formations of OPSEC

The traditional view of Operations Security (OPSEC) has its ties in the formation of human combat. Ever since the first humans began warring for territory and resources, OPSEC has always been a key to the success or failure of a mission or objective. Operations Security is a process that identifies friendly, critical, and unclassified information to determine what actions can be observed by an adversary, decides whether information obtained by adversaries could be interpreted as useful to them, and then executes selected measures that eliminate or reduce the risk of exploitation of friendly critical information. Beginning in the Vietnam era, the United States set out to review its security posture from the vantage point of the enemy. This new positioning was created as a result of abject failures during combat operations; after attacking specific targets, U.S. Forces would withdraw, but they would not see the rate of damage/destruction promised via intelligence reports. Somehow the enemy seemed aware of the operational strategy employed by the U.S. and was able to successfully predict strike times, size of the forces, and locations of attack. U.S. combatant commanders sought to find out why.

The commanders created a team of military and civilian personnel to investigate this inexplicable Vietcong awareness. After researching the issue, it was discovered that unclassified information released without consideration of its sensitivity could be used to piece together an overall picture of strategic movements and operations. Using newspaper sources, word of mouth, unencrypted communications, and supply shipment information, the team saw how an enemy force can utilize mundane information to form a hypothesis of where U.S. Forces would attack next. Once this information was given to the commanding officers, the U.S. began to employ counter-strategies in order to offset the damage this unclassified information was having on the war effort.

Thus began the formation of what we know today as Operation PURPLE DRAGON. From its beginnings in 1966 and 1967, PURPLE DRAGON proved to be one of the most effective operations ever put together by the U.S. Military. It prompted investigations into how the military massed and executed their forces and subsequently compared this to the flow of information from combat operations. Consequently, unsecured information regarding troop operations was scaled back so that valuable and exploitable information could no longer flow as easily to the enemy.

Today, we still see the results of Operation PURPLE DRAGON, with the institution of the national OPSEC program mandated by the Reagan Administration and with our nation's posture on creating a balance of transparency with needed secrecy. These new postures have enabled a limited flow of data to the enemies of the United States and have saved countless lives. As threats continue to grow and as the world becomes a more dangerous place, OPSEC will always be there to protect our most precious commodity: information.

Source: PURPLE DRAGON: The Origin and Development of the United States OPSEC Program (United States Cryptologic History: Series VI, The NSA Period, Volume 2)